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WASHINGTON TIMES
21 November 1983

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New growth in terrorism

TSANTA MONICA, Calif. en years ago, because I had of necessity become fascinated by the dark terrorism that even then seemed to be sweeping over the world, I traveled for many hours to one of the most fascinating and unknown places in the world — the great, crumbling castle of Alamut.

Its ruins, ominously poised on a stark mountainside, still stand in northern Iran. It was from there, in the 11th century, that the original "Old Man of the Mountain," the evil Hassan Sabah, drugged his acolytes on hashish and sent them out to assassinate, by stealth and by sword, virtually all the known leaders of the Near East.

As I sat atop the ruins, looking out over the most majestically wild scenery I have ever seen, I felt a distinct chill. For the plan worked all too well, and the very word "assassin" comes from Hassan Sabah's viperous human vehicles, the "Hashashin" or "those who take hashish."

Today, history repeats itself, day after day after day: the Marines in Lebanon; the Israelis in Tyre; Palestinians against Palestinians; North Koreans against the South in Rangoon; Jordanian diplomats all over the world; Turkish diplomats; the American naval attache in Athens.

Terrorism, as evil old Hassan Sabah showed, is nothing new. Indeed, it existed before him, although he provided us with part of its lexicon. But there are some startling new facts and trends in terrorism that even our top policy-makers have not absorbed. Consider:

Terrorism is growing. "Despite the fact that we see more and more victories against terrorism, we see more and more of it," says Brian Jenkins, terrorism specialist at the prestigious Rand Corp. "In Turkey, for instance, you find 25,000 'terrorists' in jail.

"Although the total number of terrorist incidents will be about the same in 1983 as in 1982, the proportion of incidents with multiple fatalities is much, much greater. The number of terrorist attacks that kill ordinary citizens has increased 68 percent in 1983, making 1983 the bloodiest year on record."

And in the United States? Jenkins and others who assiduously study the problem point out that actual incidents in the United

States have declined. The United States is different. Most of its terrorism is "ethnic" or, in effect, imported from outside ethnic squabbles.

But they also point out something new and ominous: The United States, after the restrictions it placed on its intelligence-gathering capacities in the 1970s, today is hampered in preventing terrorism.

"The bottom line is that basically the new rules have limited preventive techniques," Jenkins says. "Intelligence-gathering has become more reactive. One waits until the bomb goes off. There is no way of measuring its effects on society."

As he discussed cases ranging from bombings by Puerto Rican separatists to the killing of Turkish diplomats by Armenians, he pointed out that "two-thirds of the new failures of prosecution would have been successes under the old rules."

Finally, the disturbing development is that terrorism is now considered, not only by these analysts but by many of its practitioners, not as the individual and lethal tool Hassan Sabah devised, but as a new form of warfare. It is now regarded as one of the three violent forms of warfare, along with conventional

war and nuclear war. It is here to stay, and we might as well accept that fact.

If one is capable of taking a cold and detached position, one can point out that 60 million people died in world wars in the first half of this century. In the second half, because of the increased costs and risks of warfare, powers such as the Soviet Union now prefer to use a proliferation of surrogates, proxies and terrorist-types who operate at lower levels of conflict.

Terrorism is a less coherent and actually less destructive form of warfare, but it is also more threatening to the average person — indeed, it leaves him with a sense of omnipresent danger.

We simply must as a nation — and particularly at a policy-making level — start thinking in these new terms. If we were responding to these new forms of warfare, there need not have been a Beirut Marine massacre.

And there is something else. We know that American power more and more is perceived in the world as tentative and ineffective. But that potentially fatal perception correlates not to our traditional power, it correlates to the poisonous, incremental erosion of our power at the hands of the terrorist or the irregular combatant. Hassan Sabah would have understood.